

HOW THE BLIND CAN ENJOY THE
THEATRE

F. Fraser Bond

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HOW THE BLIND CAN ENJOY THE THEATRE



*Plays on Phonograph Records Come to the
Sightless by Parcel Post, Postage Free*

By F. FRASER BOND

THE blind men and women of America now enjoy all the excitement of a Broadway play without leaving their own armchairs. Because they are unable to go to the theatre themselves, the theatre comes to them wherever they may be and comes, moreover, without the slightest cost.

The "theatre" arrives packed in stout black cartons which the postman brings — cartons which contain the long-playing phonograph discs which make up the Talking Books. On these discs many of Broadway's brightest stars have acted both hits and classics, both comedy and tragedy, in order that sightless Americans

might enjoy the delights which only the theatre at its best can offer.

These Talking Books were devised by the American Foundation for the Blind in New York, the national organization through which Helen Keller works for the upwards of 200,000 blind people in this country. They were devised because the Foundation found that less than twenty per cent of this number could read books in Braille. The recording of Broadway plays on long-playing discs is one of the latest phases of the Talking Books' usefulness.

Some 52 of these plays have been recorded to date, coming to blind people in their entirety, with incidental music and full sound effects. In fact, with everything except costumes and scenery, which the sightless playgoers could not enjoy. In place of the latter, a narrator sets the stage imaginatively and tells of action

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which the actors' words do not indicate.

The curtain goes up when the first Talking Book record is placed on the electric reading machine, which resembles a portable phonograph. The blind playgoer's favorite chair becomes then an orchestra seat on the aisle.

Perhaps the play is Maxwell Anderson's comedy of young married folk, *Saturday's Children*, with Dorothy Maguire of *Claudia* fame as the young wife, and Alfred Drake, the singing star of *Oklahoma!* as a supporting player. Or it may be *The Barretts of Wimpole Street*, the love story of two authors, or Shakespeare's *Richard II*, full of the alarums and excursions of Plantagenet politics.

Seldom have playgoers had such a varied repertoire from which to choose, for these Talking Book plays range in their scope all the way from *Oedipus Rex*, which packed them in in ancient Athens, to Mary Roberts Rinehart's *The Bat*, which packed them in on West 45th Street.

Everyone who pays taxes has a part in bringing these plays to the sightless. Each year Congress makes an appropriation for reading for the adult blind, and \$250,000 of this sum is earmarked for Talking Books and the Talking Book dramas.

When the plays are recorded in the sound studios of the American Foundation for the Blind, the Library of Congress places them in twenty-seven libraries across the land which main-

tain departments for the blind. These discs, packed in durable black cartons, travel to and from the libraries and the homes of the blind postage free.

At the sound studios of the American Foundation for the Blind, a regular procedure has been established under the production management of William Barbour and the technical direction of J. O. Kleber. The first rehearsal resembles that of any stage play, but afterwards variations from regular stage procedure enter the picture.

Although each actor studies his part, he does not need to memorize it, for he reads from script before the recording microphone. Another variation in procedure is that the play is not rehearsed by scenes and acts, but in time units of fifteen minutes since each side of the Talking Book discs plays for fifteen or sixteen minutes.

The director's task, therefore, is to break up the play into periods of approximately this length, attempting to end each period on some strong dramatic note. Occasionally, therefore, the playing time is shortened in order to end a side on a high peak of dramatic interest. It cannot be lengthened, for although the ultimate playing time of each side is sixteen minutes, time must be allowed for the spoken instruction to the reader: "This play is continued on the other side of this record."

After the play has been rehearsed unit by unit, the players assemble for a final run-through at the micro-

phone with full sound effects. Once the recording starts, the director relies on tiny colored light signals near the microphones, which flash on and off their pre-arranged instructions as to speed of reading, volume of voice, and relative position of the players.

Actors hate to get up early, but few of the Broadway players who act these shows in sound for sightless people mind turning up at ten o'clock in the morning to do their stint. Bringing their art to people who can never see them on the stage or on the screen makes a definite appeal to their emotions.

Whitford Kane, for example, has appeared in a number of these Talking Book productions, including *The Pigeon*, for which he was chosen personally by John Galsworthy. As he puts it:

"Playing for the blind, one is conscious of the blind listener being close, almost at one's elbow, so as not to miss the slightest shading in the interpretation. One has to think of a blind audience — the readers of the Talking Book — as composed of people who are actually with one as one is playing the part — who are not seated at some distance watching one move around, but are actually moving around with one."

The New York dramatic critics think highly of these Talking Book plays, and paid one of them the very high compliment of turning up at the first night" recording. Apart from the critics, the audience consisted only of Helen Keller and her com-

panion, Polly Thomson, who in the rapid finger alphabet spelled into Miss Keller's hand the speeches that came from the Talking Book discs.

The recorded play was Maxwell Anderson's *Elizabeth the Queen*, in which, according to Brooks Atkinson of THE NEW YORK TIMES, Mady Christians as the Queen and Wesley Addy as Essex "acted with remarkable fire." But it was Miss Keller who really stole the show. Again to quote Brooks Atkinson:

Although Miss Keller is familiar with the story of Elizabeth and Essex from reading history and essays, she had never heard Mr. Anderson's incendiary version of it. Partly because of her afflictions, Miss Keller is a remarkably sentient person whose responses are electric. Mr. Anderson would have enjoyed seeing how much excitement his drama gave her. As it was, the rest of us had an opportunity to realize how stirring the form of drama is to people not saturated with it.

Drama first went onto the Talking Book discs merely as straight reading. Blind students and others wished to have some of Shakespeare's plays recorded for study. Accordingly, they were read onto the discs, scene by scene, as an ordinary book would be read, chapter by chapter. Blind listeners generally showed a marked liking for these Shakespearean readings. As a result, a number of them were similarly recorded.

Then this idea came: If blind people enjoy plays so much merely as straight reading, why not let them have the complete enjoyment of them as active drama? The Founda-

tion produced R. C. Sherriff's *Journey's End* as an experiment. It succeeded.

The Library of Congress gave financial assistance, and today the total number of acted plays means that the sightless drama lover can have a fresh play every week.

These include plays by such worthies as Shaw, Galsworthy, A. A. Milne, Barrie, Yates and Dunsany, representing the British Stage, and for the active American theatre Eugene O'Neill's *Anna Christie* and *The Emperor Jones*, David Belasco's *The Return of Peter Grimm*, Booth Tarkington's *Mr. Antonio*, and a score of others.

Blind people appreciate to the full all that Broadway and the Talking Book have done for them. From a little town in the Vermont hills, a sightless woman writes, "Why go to the theatre when you can have such fine entertainment at home?" And then she adds, "In my case I could never go to the theatre."

From across the continent a man in Portland, Oregon, writes with similar enthusiasm, "I have just received a box of records containing two plays by Shakespeare. They were dramatized! I was delighted by them and enjoyed them so much. These records are the finest thing ever produced for the blind. Being able to borrow them is like owning a little theatre of one's own."

A blind man in a hospital in Iowa says, "My best compliments to the

great advance in dramatizing the plays which in the past were read. They seem more real to me, and I have a much better vision of just what is taking place."

Karsten Ohnstad, sightless author of *The World at My Fingertips*, laments that he did not have these Talking Book discs to help him in his college drama courses. Commenting on the recordings of Sheridan's *The Rivals* and Barrie's *Dear Brutus*, he writes, "I was very much pleased with their presentation. The sound effects, footsteps, creak of doors, etc., and the music between acts and scenes, add much to the atmosphere and make the plays seem real."

The soldiers, sailors and airmen who have lost their sight in their country's service discover the Talking Books and the Talking Book plays as soon as they come home from overseas. Reading machines have been placed in the wards of the military and naval hospitals where blinded servicemen begin the weeks of readjustment to their new dark world. They discover with delight that they can continue to enjoy the Talking Books when they leave the hospitals and go back home.

In its way, the Talking Book has come to stand as a symbol to these men of their country's interest in its sightless citizens, and as an indication of the desire on the part of society to lighten the path ahead for all those who must tread that path forever in the dark.



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Bond, Fraser F.

HOW THE BLIND CAN ENJOY THE THEATRE.

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1524	10 "	7 "	"	1530	12 "	9 ¾ "	"
1525	9 "	6 "	"	1532	13 "	10 "	"
1526	9 ¾ "	7 ½ "	"	1533	14 "	11 "	"
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